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Kelly Furlong

Populous

Experiential Branding + Design/Senior Associate

How a Facility's Brand Activation and Operations Can Work Together

The facilities arms race in college athletics has officially reached its next evolution. When every Division I program has new infrastructure to sell recruits, the challenge becomes how best to make yours stand out above the rest.

Innovative programs are turning to immersive branding, using a blend of graphics, interior design and audio/visual technology to create new experiences throughout their athletics facilities. Activated spaces like those at Oklahoma, Colorado and Purdue dazzle recruits, donors and fans alike, building culture along the way.

But what happens when these bells and whistles get in the way of what makes buildings function in the first place? How do you reduce rather than create more friction for facility operators? It starts with an appreciation for all the hidden qualities that make an athletics home a well-oiled machine. It starts, really, with good architecture.

The truth is, the more innovative your branding, the more it needs to coordinate with the building's architecture and engineering. This matters even if your facility is already built and being refreshed. A wall is a metaphorical blank canvas for branding. It's also a literal wall covering critical building systems.

Disregard or worse yet, ignorance, for this fact can be costly. An example of this is a university that outsourced their facility's branding and graphics to a boutique branding firm. The decision cost roughly \$400,000 in change orders because the new branding elements didn't mesh with the facility's architecture.

Architectural knowledge means branding won't throw a wrench into your building's operations.

Working with trusted builders can produce turnkey solutions that can be easily refreshed each year. The approach results in industry leaders like Texas A&M's Kevin Hurley to applaud facilities that "absolutely mesmerize guests, all while running without a hitch operationally."

Another example lies in the University of Oklahoma's new Barry Switzer Lobby. With the season rapidly approaching, the Sooners activated their new state-of-the-art football facility's entrance quickly and under budget, not only pushing the envelope of collegiate branding, but solving for operations headaches. For example, a championship trophy display was designed with a sliding track that makes for easy adding and adjusting of trophies down the road.

When all is said and done, a facility that functions well but doesn't inspire awe – or vice versa – misses the mark. More importantly, it misses the opportunity to leave an unforgettable first impression while serving well those who call it home.

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Kenny Klein

University of Louisville

Senior Associate AD for Media Relations/SID

Facility Planning Should Include Sports Information Directors

When I arrived at Louisville, historic Freedom Hall was about to be renovated and space for a media room was to be added in a new addition to the arena. I met with the architects and saw the plans, which also included a new locker room, athletic training room, coaches offices and a small storage room. It looked good to me.

When the finished construction was done, the training room had doubled in size and our media space had shrunk. I was unaware that our trainer had spent extra time with the architects throughout the project and acquired more space. I learned a valuable lesson to not only be involved early, but often and throughout any given project.

Facility planning should always include the views and expertise of your athletics communications staff.

It is important for sports information staff to be involved in planning the infrastructure to meet the multimedia needs of today's athletics departments. Live streaming is occurring at the smallest of venues and colleges and universities are producing their own telecasts. Camera locations, announcer positions, and pre-wired camera positions are key to any competition venue.

When planning, reach out to television partners. Television production personnel know best, will appreciate the inclusion and can provide helpful and mutually beneficial suggestions. For college football, ESPN has produced an 80-page venue design and development guide which addresses television throughout the stadium.

Larger projects need audio/video consultants. In building a new broadcast center which will produce live content for the ACC Network, a consultant was essential in helping pare down our wish list, getting within budget and reaching the request for proposal stage. The money saved with seeking competitive pricing and efficiencies will more than pay for the value of the consultant.

Realize that whatever technology is included may be outdated soon, so look for components that may be upgraded or expandable. Whatever is being planned for wireless, double it. Or triple it. Many facilities find that the bandwidth

established does not meet the pull of the devices for media or fans and the future will likely bring a need for even more.

Take the best elements of what you have seen in other facilities and incorporate them into your project. Ask others that have just finished a new facility what they would have done differently.

Maximizing space that could be used for one purpose on a game day and an alternate use when there is no event could be considered. Look for the best position of your media areas in relation to locker rooms to aid the most efficient postgame flow for your team and media.

Recruiting is essential for everyone. While the functionality of any space is the most important factor, technology and media areas can be a showpiece for visitors. Keep that in mind and look for "wow" factors.

Ultimately, budgets, space limitations and other factors have their way of determining a final construction or renovation project. Having communications professionals investing time with architects and construction personnel throughout a project is necessary to design a comprehensive and fully-functional facility.